

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-23WASHINGTON POST
16 October 1985*Rowland Evans and Robert Novak*

A Voice for Arafat?

Following the euphoria over capture of four Palestinian hijackers, influential figures in and outside the administration are pressing President Reagan to deny the Palestine Liberation Organization and Yasser Arafat any voice in negotiating West Bank peace as a poor-relation partner of Jordan's King Hussein.

The most powerful move to sever all PLO participation in West Bank peace talks is Israel's. The most formidable weapon is Israel's new claim to unimpeachable intelligence personally linking Arafat to terrorist operations. The pro-Israel lobby here and its staunch allies in Congress are quietly aiding Israel's efforts to write Arafat out of any Mideast peace negotiations, even if that strands King Hussein.

Reagan has not yet decided whether or when to follow the Israeli lead. Asked recently about Arafat's direct complicity, national security adviser Robert McFarlane said it had not been "established." But the emotional tenor of anti-Arafat rhetoric the past few days will play into the hands of Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres when he arrives here this week to play his anti-Arafat trump card.

The force of American public opinion now running against Arafat helps explain the unprecedented reversal at the United Nations Monday, postponing Arafat's long-scheduled speech there this week. "If there had been an actual vote on delaying it," a key U.S. diplomat at the United Nations told us, "it would have gone against the United States by probably 120 to one, the one being us." There was no vote; U.S. Ambassador Vernon Walters arranged the switch with diplomatic quietude and no floor debate.

If the PLO chairman had appeared on the podium of the United Nations as planned, the president would have felt obliged to cancel his own speech there next week. The flow of anti-Arafat sentiment in the United States is strong enough to embarrass Reagan politically if he had followed the Palestinian leader in the United Nations.

Israel's claim to have bagged an intelligence windfall implicating Arafat in the hijacking of the Achille Lauro will be Exhibit One when Peres enters the Oval Office late this week. One Israeli official credits this intelligence with demonstrating "absolute, complete and irrefutable proof that Arafat knew about this operation before it was to begin." The proof has yet to be produced here.

Israeli intelligence showed precision accuracy a week earlier when the PLO's Tunis headquarters was bombed exactly 30 minutes after the start of a secret, top-level meeting scheduled to last 90 minutes, with Arafat in the chair. What Israel did not know was that Arafat had suddenly been called to a meeting with the Tunisian prime minister and had gone there without disclosing his destination to anyone.

If Peres, with backing from the pro-Israel lobby and congressional bloc, persuades Reagan that Arafat is personally accountable for PLO terrorism, the president may find it hard to continue his support for King Hussein's West Bank peace formula: a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation, including PLO-connected members, to negotiate with Israel.

Israel's target is to bury that formula. If Peres achieves that, it would complicate what little remains of the president's chance to find

a peaceful solution on the West Bank. The complication is fundamental: the Arab world long ago designated Arafat's PLO as sole representative of the Palestinian people. Without some PLO membership in the Jordan-Palestinian delegation, Hussein foresees meaningless negotiations. The product of those talks—if there were one—would appear to have no standing on the West Bank.

Beyond the PLO and the Palestinians, moreover, the United States might find the Arab world mobilized against it if the Israeli case against Arafat and the PLO is sold to Reagan. Also against it, at least publicly, would be such U.S. allies as Portugal, Greece, Spain and Austria, all having diplomatic relations with the PLO.

But with today's anti-PLO, anti-Arafat emotional climate, political problems with foreign states may count less than normal. Serious strains have developed with at least four pro-U.S. countries long counted as allies: Egypt, Tunisia, Italy (which is now in a parliamentary crisis over the freeing of Mohammed Abbas), and Morocco. Moroccan King Hassan was due on a high-level visit here yesterday but cancelled at the last minute because of growing anti-Americanism in the Arab world.

The recent pattern of Reagan's Mideast diplomacy shows why Peres thinks he can persuade the president to erase Arafat and the PLO from the West Bank blackboard. If he is wrong, the cause will not be Peres' failure so much as Hussein's retention of Reagan's true loyalty. That is one constant in a Mideast where Israel's sway continues to enlarge.

© 1985, News America Syndicate